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ABSTRACT

Few actions are more important to a school board than the selection of a new superintendent. A rural district can use the search process to unify constituents and clarify its mission. This paper presents a 17-item checklist that outlines the steps in the selection process. The checklist is currently undergoing pilot study in Nevada to determine its relevance for use in rural school districts. Six items appear to have special significance in rural settings and address the issues of: (1) the lack of administrative depth in rural areas; (2) how to make salary decisions; (3) whether to develop a brochure; (4) the scope of the search; and (5) who to involve in the screening and selection process. Other items cover the areas of district goals and priorities, superintendent qualifications, content of the application, background checks, interview questions, contracts, and future evaluation. (SV)

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Superintendent Search: Special Considerations for Rural School Districts

Myrna Matranga

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Fewer actions are more important to a school board than that of selecting a new superintendent. A rural district can utilize the search process to unify constituents and clarify its mission. This paper outlines the selection process noting steps that may hold special significance to rural boards.

Survey research points out the varied role of a rural school superintendent. Kennedy et al. (1987) surveyed school board presidents in order to identify characteristics of successful rural superintendents. Results focused on communications skills and the ability to work well with others. To a lesser degree, attention turned to finance and other educational issues like curriculum development. While the research looks at specific skills identified as traits desired in a rural superintendent, little discussion has dealt with the selection process itself.

University consultant, Dr. Myrna Matranga, has developed a checklist of considerations which outlines the steps in the selection process. Each step is being examined on a pilot basis in Nevada regarding its unique significance to rural districts. The checklist itself is a series of 17 questions. Six items seem to have greater or special significance in typical rural settings. The following depicts the complete list:

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RURAL SCHOOLS AND THE SUPERINTENDENT SELECTION PROCESS

A Checklist of Considerations

1. _____** Are you facing an emergency? And, what are your options?

2. _____** Should you hire a consultant?

3. _____ Have you determined the district's current priorities and goals? (A search without goal setting is like a shot in the dark.)

4. _____ What superintendent qualifications are you seeking? How do they relate to the district's priorities?

5. _____** How to consider the salary issue? How to remain competitive?

6. _____ Who will participate in the selection process? How to delegate?

7. _____ Who will handle media coverage?

8. _____** How to develop the brochure? Why is it so important and should it include the application form?

9. _____** Do you want to have a national, regional, state or within district search and recruitment effort? (Why to stay in and when to go out.)

10. _____ What do you want to constitute the complete application? (the resume, application form, written narrative and letters of recommendation)

11. _____** How does the screening process work? Should the board be represented in the process?

12. _____ Who announces the semi-finalists?

13. _____ How important is the background check?

14. _____ When should you consider visiting the applicant's home location?

15. _____ How critical are the interview questions? (open meeting laws, receptions, etc.)

16. _____ How important is reaching a consensus?

17. _____ Hoe does this relate to the contract and basis for evaluation?

Of those listed, items 1 and 2 identified concerns related to the lack of administrative depth in small rural areas. Specialists tend not to be available to absorb the additional work pertaining to the search process. Should an emergency occur and a superintendent leave in the middle of the school year, it may be necessary to hire a temporary administrator to fill the gap while a search is being completed.

Item 5 hits at an extremely sensitive issue to rural districts. While it is important to attract "the best," boards are concerned about paying a salary which exceeds that earned by a large majority of the citizens of the community. A sensible balance based on local demographics as well as the training and experience of the applicant is desirable.

Brochure development (item 8) may be important in a rural district for several reasons, namely a desire to appeal to the widest audience while honestly representing the rural community. Printing and graphics assistance may be limited though all agreed doing business in the community is important. The scope of the search typically results in a national search. However, rural boards seem concerned about interviewing candidates who know, understand and appreciate rural life.

Item 11 addresses the screening process. All boards recognize the benefit of involving educators and community in the screening procedure. What seems unique to rural environments is the inclination for the board to retain responsibility for this aspect of the screen. The scope of work and the desire to

involve internal and external publics tend to move rural boards toward establishing a screening committee to assist in the preliminary review leading to the selection of the semi-finalist candidates.

In sum, procedures for selection of a superintendent may be impacted in part by rural considerations. In general, there may be a greater need for external support and attention to local values and demography may impinge upon salary and the scope of the search in rural communities. (Pilot work in utilizing the checklist continues in Nevada districts.)

References

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